

“Neurobiological Research and the Impact of the Media”

Good afternoon. It is a pleasure to be here today to discuss this important public health issue. We are honored to have a distinguished panel of witnesses here. I appreciate your presence, and all of your hard work in this arena over the years.

We will discuss today the potential impact of the media on children’s health and the opportunity for neuroscience and neurobiological research to give us additional tools and information as we explore this issue. This is simply a conversation about what sort of cultural environment we wish to provide for our children.

There is a growing body of hard and verifiable evidence that suggests the violent and sexual content of entertainment media can be harmful to children’s development. Most of the studies and reviews by government and professional health organizations showed a relationship stronger than many proven associations, such as second-hand smoke and lung cancer or calcium intake and bone density.

The studies plainly demonstrate links between early exposure to entertainment violence and aggressive attitudes and behaviors; increased levels of violent crime against others; and desensitization to real life violence. Recent studies, such as Professor Murray’s brainmapping, have only furthered this research with more intriguing hypotheses – such as indicating that viewing “made up” violence affects us physically the same way that viewing real violence does, registering in the areas of our brain that store long-term memories of traumatic events.

Meanwhile, our children are exposed daily to heavy doses of violence through their broad access to media – all at an age when their minds and values are being formed and they are developmentally incapable of distinguishing fantasy from reality.

Even many adults have problems distinguishing fantasy from reality. For example, how many times have adults confused television actors and the characters they play? Look at the classic show “Dr. Kildaire.” It received thousands of letters a week from adults seeking medical advice. It’s why the famous television ad had to come up with the tag-line: “I’m not a doctor, but I play one on TV.”

This is a national issue, one that affects all of us. This is clearly illustrated by a recently-released University of Michigan study that presents some of the most powerful and compelling evidence on the subject of television violence. This longitudinal study, where the researchers followed the same children and tracked the effects years later, discovered that exposure to media violence during childhood directly predicts young adult aggressive behavior for both males and females. This is true even when the effects of socioeconomic status, intellectual ability, and a variety of parenting factors are controlled. That is a stunning conclusion. In other words, contrary to our previous notions, violence does not discriminate who it affects, regardless of one’s social standing, intellectual capability, or family conditions.

Think about it. Scientific research is clearly showing that watching violence makes people more

violent – and not just at the time they watch the violence, that is, not just on the school yard as children, but years later, as adults. Many of us are already concerned about our society and our culture today – what happens when this generation grows up?

We must understand the powerful public impact of entertainment media. It plays a role in every part of our lives, affecting us whether we realize it or not. Through television, movies, the Internet and more, the media helps shape our attitudes and assumptions – it influences, and in many ways, creates, our decisions and behavior.

For, in this time of war, that is another key point we cannot ignore: our entertainment media have a worldwide influence. American movies, television shows, music and video games are popular exports. American entertainment is the most pervasive, and loudest, ambassador we have. Unfortunately, its message is too often destructive – and incorrect.

As a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, I have seen this far too often – and two researchers in Boston recently proved this point clearly. In a Boston University survey entitled, “The Next Generation’s Image of Americans,” teenagers from 12 countries responded that they – though only 12 percent had ever visited America – considered Americans to be violent, prone to criminal activity and sexually immoral. The key to their opinions? Their self-confessed exposure to American television, movies and pop music. Watching some of the entertainment media of today, it is no wonder they have this view.

It is why this hearing is a particularly critical event and why it is an especially important to fund additional research now. The best way to determine what impact the popular culture has on our attitudes and behavior, what influence our culture exerts, is to do what we are doing today – to encourage research discussion. To discover new evidence – and possible new solutions.

We must continue to spread the message that the content of our media is a serious public health concern. The risks to our children, ourselves, our society and, most important, our future are unpredictable and incalculable. Therefore, we must continue to analyze, evaluate, study, research, and oftentimes criticize these products and their effects – these actions are not only compatible with a free society and liberty, but essential to their very survival.